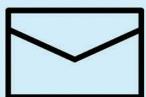


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ASPIRING TO BE GREATER

By David Lee

The action packed life of a gym leader was one Aizawa doesn't really miss. It was stimulating for sure, but it was constant stimulation, a torrential rain of never ending challengers, sights and sounds. He loves his little house he had managed to buy on the edge of a decently large town. Big enough to be convenient, and houses a gym that has a steady flux of pokemon trainer hopefuls. It was peaceful, and a welcome change to his life during a time he really needed it.

Aizawa knew something like this would happen when he let Yamada convince him to sign up for the mentorship program. He had been convinced to join after he finished his few years at the dark type gym a few cities over. Now he lived his quiet life with his Pokemon, challenging a few interesting looking trainers as they moved throughout the area as any self-respecting ex-gym leader would.

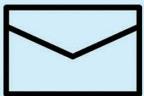
Mentored kids were always easy to spot, because of the pin they usually all wore, each different mentor has a unique design. It made testing out his friend's mentees whenever they passed through easier. He has had a few kids come to him before, but usually, older teenagers, looking for advice on how to balance their teams properly, or other higher-level things, stuff that never took longer than a few months.

Never before had he taken on a long term mentee before, and standing at his door, was a young kid, holding an Eevee, and next to him was an Arcanine that was taller than him! But the damning evidence, was the black little pin, with an Umbreon yellow circle, that was on his collar. Evidence that this kid was apart of the mentorship program, and was officially his mentee.

This was the nightmare scenario. He knew, deep down in his bones, that this was his fault for not listening to Hizashi, and not setting up his mentor profile himself. "Good afternoon Aizawa-sensei!! My name is Midoriya Izuku! I signed up for the mentorship program, to study under you. My Eevee doesn't have a name yet, because we're waiting till she evolves! My Arcanine's name is Rae! Please treat us well!" The boy says, slightly rocking in place with what looks to be poorly contained excitement.

Already, he can feel a headache coming on, this is exactly what he needed, alas he must take it into stride like a good member of society. As the boy talked, Aizawa inspected his pokemon. Both looked to be in wonderful condition, Rae looked strong and healthy, and even though the Eevee was a little small, she looked feisty. Wonderful.

Gesturing, he invited the kid inside, "In you come, you already know my name, so there's no use introducing myself." Stepping back, Midoriya walks in, followed by his towering dog, who thankfully



fits in the room without a struggle. Rae's a lot bigger than his Mightyena, Erase, which he had been slightly worried about for the first few seconds.

They easily find a place to sit, with Midoriya and his tiny Eevee taking a chair, and his Arcanine, as daintily as something its size can, taking a seat next to his legs. Aizawa busied himself getting some crackers and something to eat for the kid, and a few snacks for the Pokemon, both his own and Midoriya's.

Sitting on the chair across from Midoriya, and huffing when Ruse, his Umbreon, decided to jump into his lap. "Okay so, I've never had a student this young, but I'm willing to put in the work if you are. It's not often someone goes out of their way to try and train under me. Now, tell me why you want my training," he told the kid, keeping his face straight to gauge the kid's reactions.

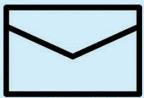
Midoriya's face never changed from a determined look, as he was fidgeting in his seat. "I watched a lot of tournaments when I was younger, and I've always wanted to be a trainer! I wanted to be like All-Might Yagi for a long time, but when I got older, I realised I didn't really like fighting types, and I found out about dark types from you!" Stopping to take a breath, he fiddles with his hands.

After taking another deep breath, he continues, "I still want to be a trainer like him, but I want to use dark types! You and your Umbreon are our inspiration, we want to be sneaky, but also dazzling! To be as best as we can be, and give people hope that they can be trainers too! I know it's a little childish, but it's what I want to do! And I'm going to do it any way possible!" Midoriya says with conviction.

Aizawa watches as he jostles his Eevee with every exaggerated set of hand movements. The little Pokemon seemingly trying to tell her own story, because she yipped and growled along with every one of Midoriya's words. It was adorable because he was so tiny but so headstrong. Aizawa knew he had no choice, as soon as the kid started speaking.

He was a goner from the start, no chance of escape at all. Internally cursing Hizashi, he starts talking again, "Is there anything in particular you're looking for me to teach you? I'm going to be putting one hundred and ten percent into this, and I fully expect you to as well. As you already know, my type speciality is Dark types, but it's important to not just have a full team of one type, you're already on your way there with your Arcanine."

This started a long, back and forwards conversation about the things the kid did and didn't know about, each list was about as long as each other, he had an impressive well of knowledge, something that would no doubt come in handy through his years as a trainer.



Together, they talked about his Pokemon, and what they wanted to do, if they wanted to fight, or do pageants. The answer was a resounding yes, Midoriya wanted to do everything. It didn't take long for the kid to grow on Aizawa, and before he knew it, he was ushering him out the door, and sending him on his way home with plans to meet a few days later.

Thus began, Aizawa's very very long headache. His problem child, as he liked to call him, wanted to know everything possible, but he didn't want to slow down. He wanted to know things and he wanted to know them now. Aizawa's biggest issue, one that he shared with the boy's mother. Neither of them could get him to slow down. Between the boy and his Pokemon, the only time they stopped was to eat food and sleep. Other than that, they were training or learning.

Midoriya seemed to enjoy it, but both adults knew it wasn't sustainable, so they shut it down as best as they could. Midoriya's resistance to downtime, lead to Aizawa getting pulled into some weird trips by the family of two. The most memorable one was when he was invited to the beach by them and decided to go if only to stop the kid from trying to train while he was there.

When he woke up from his customary beach nap, he had been buried in the sand up to his neck. Needless to say, Inko - as she had all but demanded he call her - had taken so many pictures. Pictures that he could not escape from, and were often used as blackmail against him, to make him stay for dinner, or drop by for lunch.

The moment of his time spent mentoring Midoriya he held closest to his heart, was the evening the tiny Eevee evolved. Aizawa, for the first time in a while, was speechless. Both Midoriya and his Eevee had been adamant about evolving her into an Umbreon, but he hadn't fully believed him until that moment. They had been out that evening to try and find some other types of Pokemon for Midoriya to study, and hopefully battle some easier trainers along the path.

Midoriya had managed to win a few battles, and had lost a few as well. Aizawa was proud when he took his loses with grace, and thanked his opponent every time he lost. Just as they had finished up their last battle for the night, something magical began to happen. Midoriya was the first to react, "Oh! She's evolving, I never thought it would be this soon!!! We've been working so hard, but I thought it would take longer!" Midoriya started to cry, something Aizawa had become extremely familiar with.

Aizawa pulled out a tissue from the small package in his pocket and handed it to his mentee. He had guessed that they had been working towards evolution, but he wasn't sure what they'd decided on, aside from Midoriya's ringing proclamation of wanting an Umbreon like him. He gasped, when the evolution light faded, and a large Umbreon jumped forward, and bowled over Midoriya.



Laughter rang around the small clearing they were in, and it was a beautiful scene. A young boy smiling widely, pinned down by an Umbreon who was yipping and howling her own happiness to the world. A gruff faced mentor standing to the side, a small understated smile on his face as he watches the pair. "I'm going to call her Daze! Because she's going to be dazzling!" Midoriya called out to him, still pinned on the ground by his large pokemon.

He was shocked, and deep down he was extremely happy. It wasn't often that dark types were given a time of day by most people. Dark types were often cast aside, and called evil Pokemon based off their typing, instead of their actions. The implications of Midoriya's choice caught him off guard for a second, and he will feverishly deny that even a single tear was shed when Midoriya starting to proudly show off his very own Umbreon.

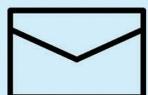
After that point, Midoriya seemed to let himself have more downtime, to the relief of both his mother and Aizawa himself. It didn't take them long to realise that the reason he wouldn't give up, was because he wanted to prove to himself, and them, that he had what it takes to make it. After one conversation with the both of them that was filled with tears, snot, and reassurance, Aizawa and Inko had fully made sure that the young boy knew he was supported and believed in.

In sharp contrast, the hardest day of his life since he took on Midoriya as his mentee, was the day he had to call Inko, and ask her to come to the local clinic, carefully explaining that he'd lost sight of her son during training, and he'd managed to break his leg in the few minutes the kid had been out of his sight. asking him to come to the local clinic. Through the phone he could hear her panicked scrambling around the house to gather her things.

It was heart wrenching hearing her scramble around, and he quickly ended the call after trying to reassure her that everything would be okay, and he was going to be okay. The time he spent waiting for her to arrive, he felt terrible. It was meant to be his job to keep Midoriya safe and help him become stronger, but here he was, waiting in a clinic to see the kid he'd come to really care about.

It didn't take long for Inko to burst into the clinic, looking extremely frazzled, and he couldn't blame her at all. He was quick to tell her what he knew had happened. "The doctors say he broke his leg. He ran off while I was quizzing him on the move set of a Pokemon he'd spotted. It took me a few seconds to realise he'd ran off, and I immediately started looking for him. I didn't find him until I heard his yell. He'd spotted a hurt Pokemon and ran off to help them, but he hadn't been paying attention to the ground and slid down a steep drop. I caught up to him, and brought him straight here."

Aizawa takes a deep breath, and presses a tissue from his stash into her hand, before drawing her in for a hug. He does his best to calm her down as they wait for the doctor to finish up with Midoriya. Talking about random things to keep her distracted. He felt terrible, but he knew that he



couldn't have stopped the kid.

It takes a while, but eventually they are taken to see the poor kid. He looks like trash, but there's a smile on his face. The smile puts Aizawa at ease, as long as the kid's smiling, everything is bound to be okay. Inko immediately started crying again, with Midoriya trying to soothe his mother. Moving forward, he ruffled the kid's hair. Before he could move away, he looked up, and the look of utter relief in the kids eyes almost made him cry.

It took him a while to recover, but as soon as he could, he was back on his feet literally and figuratively. He was back to training, smiling, and dragging his mentor around on strange and endearing adventures. Inko still threatens him with the beach pictures to make him stay for dinners, and outings.

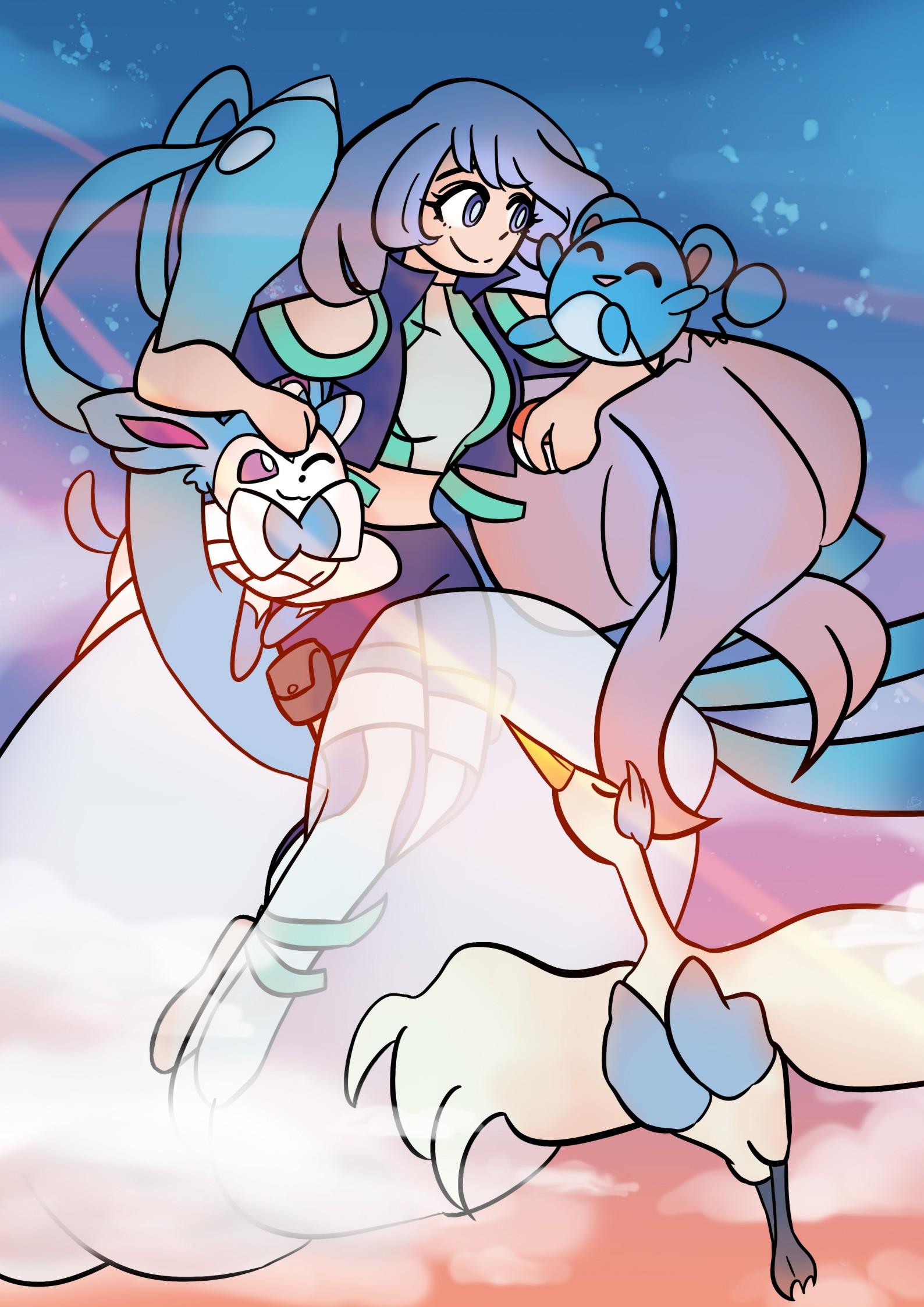
Midoriya never quit, he was always pushing to be stronger, to improve himself. The first gym badge he won was cause for celebration for everyone, it was the build-up of all Aizawa's help, and Midoriya's dedication. Between the three of them, they had a great night celebrating his first win, one of many to come if Inko and Aizawa had anything to say about it.







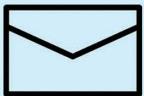






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THE SPARK OF ADVENTURE

By Izupie

There appeared to be a boy hanging from one of the high windows of the Pokémon Gym.

Ochako turned to the Torchic at her side and raised her eyebrows in a silent question. Her partner Pokémon, Ketsui, fluffed out the feathers on his body and ruffled his tiny wings to make himself look bigger – not an entirely successful feat for such a small adorable Pokémon, but the message was clear enough: *let's investigate*. Ochako nodded and they both moved stealthily over. She could hear the boy talking as she got closer and when she stood practically beneath him, she shielded her eyes from the mid-afternoon sun and looked up warily, her hand hovering over the pokéball attached to her belt.

She could just about catch what he was saying. He spoke with a voice full of energy and mischief.

"Can you see the Gym Leader? What? No? What about the guy who wouldn't let us in? He's got to take a break sometime. Uh yeah, of course I can hold us here until he takes a break. Then we'll sneak in, 'kay?"

Squeaks answered each of his questions.

She could easily see his slender frame shaking with the effort of hanging from the window ledge, and she noticed something small and yellow on top of his mop of blonde hair.

Unable to hold back her curiosity Ochako cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled up to him, "What are you doing up there?"

There was a yelp, a squeak and a flash of light. Ochako winced as the boy landed heavily in the grass, sprawled out with a dazed Pichu on his chest.

The boy immediately groaned and sat upright, rubbing his head, while his blonde bangs fell either side of his face. One side had a strange black lightning mark dyed into them. The Pichu rolled into his lap.

"I'm so sorry! H-Here, I've got a potion I can use on your Pichu." Ochako shrugged off her pink backpack and shoved a hand inside while Ketsui clicked his beak at the strange duo.

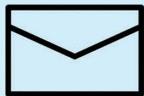
"Oh man, what the heck..." the boy groaned.

"I think I scared your Pichu into a thunder shock – oops, my bad!" Ochako smiled apologetically and held out the potion like a peace offering.

"Huh? Wha- CB? You okay, bud?" The boy patted a hand on the Pichu's head, but it only made a dazed sound in reply.

Ochako leaned down and the potion spray hissed out in a fine mist. Both trainers watched it work so instantly it was almost magic; the Pichu blinked its eyes open, shook its head, and rubbed its cheeks with a happy squeak.

Ochako let out a relieved breath as both trainer and Pokémon laughed and hugged, but Ketsui



chirped loudly as he pointed with his beak to the window ledge and back to the boy.

Ketsui's right. Stay on track, Ochako, she chided herself.

She cleared her throat and placed her hands on her hips. "So," she said, "what were you doing at the window over there anyway?"

"Trying t'see if the gym leader was in there," he said brightly, as if it should have been obvious.

"By looking through the window? There's a front door, y'know."

The boy ruffled his hands through his hair and the Pichu on his lap reached up to flick away a piece of grass sticking out of his bangs. "Yeah, I tried the front door, but the guy there wouldn't let me in. I mean, I even told him I didn't want to battle, I just wanted an autograph, but he said I had to have an appointment to see the leader. What the heck is with that?"

Ochako let out a snort of amusement. "Um, yeah, that's kind of how Pokémon gyms work."

"Seriously? Man, that sucks..."

"Oh, are you... not from around here? The appointment system keeps the leaders from having to spend all day in the gym just in case a challenger randomly shows up. Keeps it ordered and stuff."

"Yeah but that just makes things harder for my mission."

"Your mission?"

He jumped to his feet as the Pichu climbed onto his shoulder and extended a hand for her to shake, but before Ochako could react Ketsui dashed in front of her. Her Torchic held open his fluffy wings as threateningly as he could. The boy gave a wary glance to Ketsui as he lowered his hand and stepped back.

"Name's Kaminari Denki." He threw her double finger guns and she giggled. (Ketsui squawked in indignation as the Pichu copied his trainer.) "My family moved here from the Johto region last week. I'm off to get the signatures of the gym leaders with my partner here - his name's Chargebolt but I just call him CB." CB squeaked happily in a greeting.

"Nice to meet ya, my name's Uraraka Ochako. And this is Ketsui- sorry about him- he can be a little grumpy with strangers," she said fondly, while he fluffed up all of his feathers in indignation. "We used to live up north in Uravity City but we're kind of hopping around the place while I'm collecting the gym badges in time for the Yuuei League Festival, so I can challenge the Champion."

Denki clapped and whistled. "Nice."

"Thanks! I mean, um, I know it sounds a little bit crazy to think of going after the Champion right now, but... that's what all the journeying and the gyms are for right? Getting stronger," Ochako said. "Can you imagine all the sponsorship deals and royalty money you'd get as Champion? My parents could quit their jobs, it'd be great-" She blinked and tilted her head. "-Wait... did I hear you say you wanted their *signatures*?"

"Uh, yeah. You can buy a set of replica badges online for, like, practically nothing. Why even get the real things?"

"Huh?"



"It's way cooler to have something unique. Who can say they've got all eight signatures, right?" Denki gave CB a high five with a laugh.

"I don't know, I'm pretty sure you can buy replicas of those online too," Ochako muttered. Ketsui chirped a tiny snickering laugh.

"What?"

"I- um- I said it's pretty cool that you're doing what you wanna do." Ochako replied with a flustered flap of her hands.

"Thanks man. Just gotta get past the guy on the door somehow. This dude's battle appointments are all booked up for days."

"Well, that's actually what *I'm* here for - my appointment is in a few minutes. I got here early hoping to relax before my match but..." She let the pause hang and let her gaze pointedly linger on Denki.

He turned around slowly, as if she was looking at something behind him, and CB reached up from his perch on Denki's shoulder to tap him repeatedly on his cheek.

"Wh- me?"

Ochako giggled. "Y'know what? You guys probably relaxed me better than if I'd have sat in there waiting for my match anyway," she admitted with a smile, "so I'll ask for Yousetsu's signature when I win, and you can have it."

"Seriously? You're the coolest!"

Ochako rubbed the back of her head while Ketsui pecked with irritation at her ankle.

When they got into the entrance of the gym Ochako signed in for her appointment and added Denki's name on as her 'support'. The man behind the desk eyed Denki suspiciously but he smugly announced, "I'm with her," and stuck his tongue out as they moved further inside. (Ochako let a hiss of laughter escape her lips.)

The gym increased in heat the further in they went; the air practically shimmered with it. Denki shrugged out of his black jacket and she removed her pink one, tying it around her waist instead. The heat only seemed to get Ketsui more pumped though up as he ran ahead of them, his talons making scratching sounds on the shiny steel floor.

The gym leader was waiting for her at one end of a huge room. His eyes burned with fiery determination and his spiky black hair was pushed out of his face by a bright blue headband, making it stick up. Ochako took her position in the gym battle arena and Ketsui was at her side instantly, fluffed up and ready to fight. Denki and CB stood nearby, observing from the side-lines.

Ochako breathed deeply. No time for nerves now.

"Welcome, challenger Uraraka Ochako! I'm Awase Yousetsu, leader of the Welding Gym!"

"Th-Thanks," Ochako replied, desperately trying to keep her voice level. Her first real gym battle!

"Rules are simple," he went on a more relaxed tone as he adjusted his headband, "it's a one-on-one match where either your Pokémon kicks my Pokémon's ass, or mine kicks yours." Yousetsu grinned. "Got it?"



Ochako nodded, feeling more at ease. "Ready!" Her eyes darted to the side to catch sight of Denki and he threw her two thumbs up while CB jumped up and down beside him.

A woman at the side of the battlefield held up a green flag and yelled 'start'. Immediately Yousetsu threw a pokéball and a flash of shiny metal alerted Ochako instantly to the type of Pokémon he was using, if the theme and name of the gym hadn't been a clue enough already.

The Aron squeaked and shook its head as it braced its body for the battle.

"Come on Ketsui, let's get our first badge!" *And a signature for Denki*, she added silently.

Her Torchic partner leaped into the battle and she had to yell out a move to stop him from just charging straight at his opponent with no plan. "Ketsui, use ember!"

Ketsui opened his beak and a small flame streamed out towards the Aron. Ochako clenched her fists, anticipating the damage that move was going to do against the steel Pokémon, but at the last minute she heard Yousetsu command, "Aron, dig!"

Aron disappeared behind a cloud of dust while Ketsui's ember attack burned harmlessly through the air where it had been.

She clicked her tongue in frustration – she only had to get Ketsui to land a close-range ember and the battle would be over!

Ketsui hopped on his two feet in preparation for trying to dodge the inevitable attack from below, but Ochako clenched her fists at her side while she tried not to panic. *Think, think...*

Out of time, and with no instruction from his trainer, Ketsui felt the full force of Aron bursting from the ground.

"Ketsui!" Ochako gasped.

The Torchic struggled to its feet. Aron's steel body made for a heavy impact and he looked dazed from the blow.

"You okay?" she called, fighting the impulse to run to him and hold him in her arms. Ketsui chirped and scraped his talons against the ground – *I'm fine keep going* – she thought he seemed to say. Ochako bit her lip, not ready to give up. "Ketsui, listen, if you use peck to flip Aron over onto its belly it can't dig away, then you can use ember before it gets up!"

Yousetsu punched a hand into the air. "You heard her Aron; use harden and don't let that chicken flip you."

The two Pokémon got close but every time Ketsui went in for the peck Aron pulled himself tight and unmovable. Just as Aron hardened its body once more Ochako grinned. "Alright, now Aron's slowed himself down – use bounce, and at the top of your jump change into ember all the way back down!"

"Hey- what!"

Ketsui leaped high into the air, using his tiny wings to give him extra lift, and opened his beak to let out a stream of attack directly above Aron that showered him in a fiery torrent.



The battle was over.

The judge declared Aron unable to continue and Yousetsu returned it to a pokéball.

"Ketsui! We did it!" Ochako rushed forward and he leaped into her arms while she spun around in a circle.

Denki raced to her side and punched the air. "You nailed it! That was awesome!"

Once they'd left the gym Ochako took a moment to look at the shiny badge sitting proudly in the palm of her hand. It was just a shiny silver square, but it was her very first step on the road to challenging the Pokémon League Champion. She peeked over at Denki, who was chattering excitedly to CB about the signature in the small book he was holding. He looked up and grinned.

"So where to next champion-in-training?"

Ochako pocketed her badge and tilted her head as she started walking. "We're travelling buddies now?"

Ketsui pecked at Denki's ankles as he walked after her, while CB lounged on his head.

"Course. How else am I gonna get the rest of these signatures?"

Ochako smiled. "Hm, well, how about becoming a trainer and battling the gym leaders yourself, like everyone else?"

Denki pretended to consider her question, then pocketed his book too. "Nah. Become Yuwei's number one trainer? Who's got time for that?"



CHIZTEC







IkyoChii









No, JOINING TEAM ROCKET DOES NOT MEAN YOU GET FREE JET FUEL

By Shimikonde

It's easy to tell when something's bothering Shigaraki. The way the boss seeths is childish, incessant, like he demands the entire world recognize his malcontent. Before she even enters the room, Magne sees his arms crossed through the window, fingers twitching as they grip his arms, and his feet up on the desk in front of him—and she knows that whatever's on his mind is about to become her problem. She walks into his office with a business frown, closing the door behind her and moving to stand across from him.

She waits for him to take his feet off of his desk.

He doesn't.

Instead, he narrows his eyes, voice hissing through his clenched teeth. "You," he says. "I called you days ago."

"I've been in Johto for the past two weeks. I came as fast as I could."

He was the one who assigned her to help with the Goldenrod branch in the first place. He makes an irritated noise anyway, like she's the one inconveniencing him, before continuing on. "You need to do something about your new recruit."

Magne raises a brow. "New recruit?"

"Whoever it is has been wreaking havoc the whole time you've been gone, and it's costing us a fortune. Do something about it."

Her lips part for a question that she doesn't ask. It's been months since she last recruited anyone, and everyone from that group should have been long-since vetted. Had one of them shown their true colors once she was out of the region? She hides her confusion behind her sunglasses, pushing them up the bridge of her nose slowly.



"Understood," she says. "I'll take care of it."

She doesn't wait around before heading over to the R&D building. From the outside, it's a hole-in-the-wall sort of place, the entrance hidden through a secret passage in an old bar. It's only by going down the tunnel, walking through the labyrinthine halls and remembering exactly which of the teleportation panels will take you further (and which will send you back to where you started) that one can find the laboratory. Many people have attempted to sneak their way in and steal the experimental technology, only to be found months later, starved to death in the endless hallways.

Magne, personally, knows the place like the back of her hand.

She speeds through the maze, her Magneton at hand. As soon as she steps off the final teleportation panel, she swings toward the door to the laboratory, orders hot in her throat. She feels the cool metal of the door handle brush against her fingers—

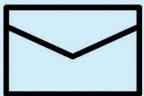
And then, with a massive sound like an angry Electrode, the door flies off its hinges.

She has to jump out of the way to dodge it. As soon as she lands, she rushes through the open door frame, past the curtain of smoke. The room is filled with damage from the explosion, computers turned to rubble, craters in the floor and tables smouldering. Usually, there are people everywhere, researching this or that, and Magne searches for them amongst the debris littering the ground. All she finds is a single pink-haired girl, standing next to a hissing machine and scribbling quick notes on a piece of paper that appears to be half-ash. She's dressed in an oil-smeared lab coat and goggles, the ends of her hair still smoking as she mutters to herself things that Magne can't hear over the ringing in her ears.

She doesn't even seem to notice Magne approaching until she's right next to her. When she looks up, pushing the goggles up to her forehead to reveal piercing, amber eyes surrounded by rings of black soot, any words Magne might've spoken die in her throat.

She's never seen this girl in her life.

What happened here, she means to ask, but what leaves her mouth is, "Who the hell are you?"



Spies are fairly common in Team Rocket. Given both the relative ease of joining and the illicit activities they don't bother to hide, it isn't all that unusual to find out that the person you recruited last week was a spy, or even that someone you'd known and trusted for years was one of the Pokemon League's plants the whole time. So, they'd developed procedures for whenever they found one, starting with the interrogation. First Toga would go in to loosen the person up, followed by someone with a soft enough touch to play a Good Cop role, usually Magne.

It usually works pretty well, and they don't have to go onto the next stage.

Today, however, things are not going according to protocol.

The second Toga steps in the room, the girl slips out of the ropes they'd bound her in and pulls a fresh, crisp resume from gods knows where. She stands so she can hand it to Toga, who is similarly baffled, and then allows herself to be tied back up as she goes through an impassioned self-introduction.

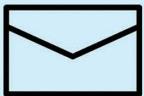
She introduces herself as Hatsume Mei, and within two minutes she's managed to change the interrogation into a sales pitch. It starts with a complement on Toga's outfit, then moves to her makeup, then to her nails. Her manicure looks so cute, but doesn't she just hate it when the paint chips? If only there was some way to make the top coat last longer—but wait! As a matter of fact, Hatsume has something just for that! She'd originally invented it as a way to make sure her important slides lived through explosions, but it worked just as well for nails, keeping them preserved for weeks. Hatsume doesn't usually give it away to people she's just met, but she's willing to make an exception for Toga, all for the low, low price of—

When Toga pops her head out of the room to ask if Magne has her wallet on her, she decides it's time to call someone else.

Twice had come along with Toga to watch, so Magne has him go in next, but he doesn't last much longer. It's only a matter of time before he starts reaching for the money in his back pocket, and Magne has to pull him out before any further damage is done to Team Rocket's reputation.

She calls other people after that. Spinner is a wash. Mr. Compress quickly loses sight of their goal in an effort to secure the spotlight for himself. Dabi never even shows up.

Magne knows that it would be simplest if she went in and did the interrogation herself, but she's



always preferred to play a more sisterly, understanding role during questioning, so she calls up her very last hope.

Giran.

Slippery guys like him have never been her type, so she doesn't like calling him if she can avoid it. But the only higher-ups she hasn't called yet are him and Shigaraki, and she doesn't think her boss would take as kindly to the girl's domineering attitude.

At first glance, Giran seems to do the best of the lot of them, if only for the fact that he's enough of a salesman himself to dodge her pitches. When he leaves the interrogation room, he immediately pulls out a cigarette, though. He lights up with a sigh, taking a long drag before admitting, "Couldn't get a read on her."

Magne opens her mouth, but Giran continues before she can retort, gesturing to the Pokeball on his belt. "Partner couldn't either, for that matter. Said that there was some kind of interference"

Ridiculous.

"You expect me to believe that this—" Magne glances down at the stack of resumes in her hand, frowning. "*—supposed* twenty-year-old is too complicated for you or your Abra to get a proper read on?" People training their minds against psychic attacks is something that she's seen in movies, but never heard about in real life. It's hard to imagine that this girl, who Magne doubts is even as old as she says she is, has managed to do it.

Evidently Giran shares this sentiment, as the next thing he asks is if they've taken away all of her Pokemon, which they have. They even took away the obnoxious talking cell phone she carried around, though they still aren't sure if it's a machine or a Pokemon yet.

Before she tells Giran he can go, she asks him, "So, what do you think? Is she a spy?"

"If she is, she's not like any that I've ever interviewed before."

Magne pushes past the non-answer, looking at him levelly. "What's your opinion?"

He hesitates, and this is the part of Giran that she's never liked. He dances around issues and



refuses to speak in clear terms, even when it's about something as important as a potential spy. There's a moment where neither of them say a word, the gentle hiss of Giran's cigarette the only thing filling the silence as Magne looks through the one-way glass to where Hatsume's sitting. She's hunched over, a hand propping up her head and a sullen, bored look on her face. She stares at the door, fingers rapping impatiently against the table while her foot taps a hole into the floor.

"If you want my opinion... I don't think that she's a spy." Giving a straight answer seems to physically pain him, and he doesn't elaborate, but that's fine. Magne's of the same opinion. The girl is too conspicuous, and she conducts herself like she has no awareness of the situation she's in—or like she doesn't care.

And that's not to mention the explosions.

When Magne finally enters the interrogation room, she's all business. No good cop, no bad cop, just a domineering expression and a set of questions to which she needs answers. Where her associates have failed, she thinks, is that they have allowed themselves to get too involved in Hatsume's game of cat and mouse. So, she learns from their mistakes, stands tall and taut, and doesn't respond when the girl perks up at the sight of her and says, "You must be my boss!"

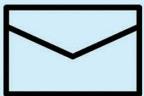
Unperturbed, Hatsume continues, "I hope you've read my resume. I told them to give you a copy, and I think you'll find—"

Magne doesn't let her finish. She asks, "How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

Hatsume gives her a confused smile, but Magne doesn't elaborate, folding her arms in front of herself. After watching the girl talk circles around her associates, there's something satisfying about seeing her squirm for an answer.

She thinks about it for a second before saying, "Well, I found that if you apply the Pokemon-storing technology that already exists in Pokeballs to inanimate objects and program in exactly what you want them to store, you can trade bulk for specificity. It makes it really easy to store just about anything you need, in whatever quantity you need it." She slips out of her bindings effortlessly to show the sleeves of her jacket, pointing to an innocuous black button. "This is where I keep my



resumes."

Magne had told herself she wouldn't respond, but the answer is so contrary to what she expected that she forgets, eyebrows rising. She doesn't have time to ask what Hatsume's going on about before she pushes the button and a sheet of paper appears in her hand with a tiny flash of red light.

"Here," she says as she hands the resume over, and then places it on the table between them when Magne doesn't move to take it. "Mostly I just use it to store tools, but ever since I transferred to this branch I've been keeping my resumes on me, too. Just in case."

"Ever since you *what*?"

"Ever since I transferred from Silph Co. to the Team Rocket branch."

"This isn't a branch of..." Magne takes a breath to center herself. She picks her words carefully. "You realize that Team Rocket is criminal organization." It's not a question.

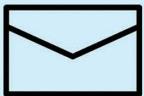
She bats her eyelashes. "Now that you mention it, I *did* get that impression during the hostile takeover of my former place of occupation."

It sounds like a joke, but Magne can't for the life of her understand what's meant to be funny about this situation. Maybe Hatsume has a death wish, she thinks. That would explain the explosions, at least.

As if sensing the confusion, Hatsume's expression mellows slightly, her voice losing its manic edge as she elaborates, "When I worked at Silph Co., it was all about corporate policies and trying to fit through loopholes. After seeing your company's working conditions first-hand during the takeover, I thought that it might suit my research better."

Magne almost corrects her—because it's not exactly accurate to call Team Rocket a company—but as far as criminal organizations go, it actually operates surprisingly similarly. She pauses, sizing the girl up. The sudden sincerity seems genuine, but Magne reminds herself that not even Giran had been able to pick up on her tells. She looks from Hatsume's hopeful smile to the shiny black buttons on her sleeves and wonders how much of what she's hearing is true.

"You really want to work here?" she asks, to which Hatsume nods decisively.



"Please hire me."

And Magne guesses that she's just as bad as the rest, because the thought is tempting. She pushes it back with another, more pertinent, question. "Why can't our psychics read your mind?"

Hatsume blinks. "Oh, *that*? It's because of this baby." She reaches into her pocket to pull out a long, black pen, clicking it a few times. "It radiates a dark-type aura, perfect for protecting your intellectual properties."

When Magne gives her a skeptical look, she just grins.

"If you're curious, I made it by reproducing the reactive enzymes that Umbreon produce when they fend off attacks, which I then altered and synthesized using some cells I collected from a dit..." She stops herself, slapping a hand over her mouth. Magne, realizing she'd begun to lead forward, straightens herself back at once.

"Sorry," she says. "Until I sign a contract, I can't tell you any more than that."

"We don't do contracts here. It's not that kind of organization."

Even as she says this, Magne feels hesitant. It's clear that Hatsume knows what she's talking about. Although she's still not *entirely* convinced that the girl was the one to have made both the pen and the buttons, if there's the slightest chance that she's responsible for them, it would be a huge oversight to let her slip from their fingers. All the more so if she's coming to them willingly.

So, just as Hatsume's expression begins to sour, Magne continues. "I can see if my boss would be willing make an acception, though. Considering the... circumstances."

Shigaraki isn't going to be happy, but when was he ever?

And, in the event that Hatsume isn't all she claims to be, Magne decides that they can deal with that then.











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